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UNTIL RELEASED BY THE
SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

STATEMENT OF
MASTER CHIEF PETTY OFFICER OF THE NAVY
(SUBMARINE WARFARE/SURFACE WARFARE)
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BEFORE THE
HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON MILITARY PERSONNEL
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Madam Chairwoman and members of the Committee, it is an honor to be with you today and represent nearly 445,000 active duty and reserve Sailors and the incredible Americans who support them as Navy family members.

Introduction:

Thirty one years ago, Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Thomas Hayward took a hard look at retention, saw it decreasing and started asking for feedback from the fleet. What he discovered was that Sailors were leaving not because of dissatisfaction with the service, but due to family issues.

Admiral Hayward made family support an immediate priority. Not coincidentally, the first Fleet and Family Support Center (formerly called Navy Family Service Center) opened in Norfolk in 1979. Over the course of the next three decades, the amount of Fleet and Family Support Centers supporting our Navy families grew exponentially, with an unprecedented expansion of services to meet the demands of a mobilized war fighting force in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout the CENTCOM area of operations.

Navy senior leadership has long understood that family readiness is tied to operational readiness. More than that, we have learned that as our commitments as a service are expanded, the possibility for stress on the family increases dramatically.

As we continue to address the needs of Sailors and their families, our guiding principles continue to target our resources to the most critical requirements, focusing on our fleet and family readiness, resilience, and quality of life. We stand committed to providing the Navy Family Readiness Program with the resources to not only sustain but enhance the core programs that have been in place for 30 years.

Since 2005, Navy Family Readiness program management, implementation, execution and programming have been aligned under Commander, Navy Installations Command. This alignment has resulted in increased effectiveness, flexibility and responsiveness in program management and service delivery from the headquarters to the installation level and has ensured that program development and resourcing decisions are not divorced from the practical realities of delivering ground-level support and responding to the challenges faced by Navy families.

Today, Navy families continue to benefit from a growing number of programs and services focusing on child and youth programs, deployment support, crisis response, career support and counseling for individuals, families and commands.

The Navy Family Readiness Program is in a continuous process of improvement and is, by design, consistently changing to remain relevant. As the dynamics of American society shift, and as Navy families continue to be representative of our nation's communities, it is absolutely critical that our support programs evolve along with the needs of our loved ones. Equally important, as the environment in which our Sailors and their families live changes along with global requirements and world events, we must be mindful of the best ways to support the Navy family. Today, that environment includes more frequent and often longer deployments and deployments that are individual versus unit deployments.

As we speak, fourteen thousand United States Sailors are serving on the ground, alongside Soldiers and Marines in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility. That's compared to the ten thousand Sailors serving onboard our ships in the same theater. Those numbers, more than anything else, point to a shift in traditional Navy missions and an increase in responsibility for our service.

What we must be cognizant of, is that those numbers also indicate a trigger for more stress on the family and more stress on a force that just recently completed a gradual decrease in personnel.

Overview:

The Navy Fleet and Family Support Program is organized into three sub-functional areas: Deployment Readiness, Career Support and Retention, and Crisis Response. Across all three sub-functions, services include information and referral, individual clinical and non-clinical consultation and educational classes and workshops.

Deployment Readiness has always been and remains the area of highest priority for Navy family support. It includes services provided in the areas of deployment support, ombudsmen coordination, relocation assistance, and life skills education. Deployment support focuses on practical preparation, emotional aspects of separation, supporting children during deployment, maintaining communication and closeness during deployment, and homecoming and successful re-integration of the Sailor back into their family and community.

Command Ombudsmen are trained volunteers who serve as a vital two-way communication link between command leadership and family members. Ombudsmen provide personalized support and guidance to families in adapting to the challenges of a mobile military lifestyle and extended operations necessary to meet the Navy's maritime strategy. We have recently revised the Ombudsman instruction, revitalizing several key positions and introducing a strengthened chain of support for training and education.

Career Support and Retention includes services provided in the areas of Personal Financial Management, Transition Assistance, and Family Employment Readiness.

Our Sailors are not immune to the challenges of our current economy. A significant leadership priority over the last twelve to eighteen months has been the education of our force and their families in terms of money management and personal finances.

The Navy's Personal Financial Management program provides a collaborative and comprehensive approach to education and counseling that emphasizes a proactive, career lifecycle approach to behavior modification.

Crisis Response includes programs and services provided in the areas of clinical counseling, family violence prevention, case management and victim advocacy, new parent support and sexual assault prevention and response.

Since 1979, Fleet and Family Support Centers have offered clinical counseling services unique to the Department of the Navy. Counseling services provided are brief and solution-focused in response to commonly occurring life experiences such as marital discord, parent-child conflict, or occupational/school issues. The intent of these services is early identification and prevention of more significant conditions or problems, thereby promoting improved quality of life and increased resilience in individuals and families.

Child Development and Youth Programs:

When I testified before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Quality of Life and Veteran's Affairs on February 4th I said that one of my top priorities in terms of family support was the continued emphasis on Child Development and Youth Programs. Overwhelming feedback from our families points to affordable, high-quality childcare—preferably onboard our installations—as a significant quality of life factor.

The services we provide are outstanding. We offer child care, youth development, and school transition services for 120,780 children from four weeks to 18 years of age. Our programs continue to be ranked amongst the highest in the nation for quality and oversight. Staffing and quality of our facilities are not a concern. Space limitations, however, continue to be challenging.

The Department of Defense goal is to achieve child care capacity for 80% of potential need which is sufficient capacity to place children from waiting lists within three months after care is requested. Our current capacity meets 72 percent of the potential need with a six-month placement time, except in fleet concentration areas where placement time can be longer.

Adequacy and Effectiveness of Navy Family Programs:

The Navy has developed a standard level of service for each family support program. This ensures consistent program offerings and available services across the Navy that is independent of a Commanding Officer's discretion.

Navy Family Readiness programs and services are systematically evaluated through several mechanisms, giving us both qualitative and quantitative data we can use to answer questions regarding the adequacy and effectiveness of family programs.

To meet the Department of Defense requirement for triennial inspection of all military family centers, Navy Fleet and Family Support Programs implemented an Accreditation Program. Accreditation provides detailed analysis of program operation, to include identification of strengths and areas for improvement. In addition to Navy accreditation processes, Fleet and Family Support Centers survey customers at least twice a year to ensure effective customer service and validate that services are useful for participants.

In my travels around the fleet I routinely meet with command leadership, Sailors and family members to solicit feedback on how our programs are working and where improvements can be made. Other informal needs assessment information is also obtained on a recurring basis by Fleet Family Service Center managers.

Navy Child and Youth Programs also conduct a program of unannounced annual inspection by qualified Navy child development specialists and accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children for Child Development Centers and the National Afterschool Alliance for school-aged care.

Outreach to Navy Families:

Sailors, family members, and command participants are surveyed on a recurring basis by installation Fleet and Family Support Program personnel to determine the adequacy and effectiveness of family programs. Programs are adapted accordingly in response to feedback about what does and does not work. At the enterprise level, we have learned that aggressive outreach, targeted marketing, and providing services at times and locations that are flexible and convenient increase family member utilization.

In the past, our Sailors and their families came to us for services. Today, the staffs at our Fleet and Family Support Centers are taking every opportunity to bring their programs to the customer, whether it is their workplace, their homes, or their community. An example of our aggressive outreach to Navy families is our efforts in social media. The Fleet and Family Support Program is targeting its primary customers, 18-24 year olds, with social media. More than three quarters of them have a profile on a social network site, according to a December 2008 survey from the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Sailors and their families need to know that there are many programs and services that can help them navigate the uniqueness of Navy life. Even though we have Fleet and Family Support Centers located at bases around the world, we understand that not everyone has easy access to them. Social media is one way of extending our reach to Navy families who need answers to their questions.

Social media also helps facilitate the building of a strong community network of services. It is assisting commanders in planning for and responding to family support needs. The Navy has grown over the past 30 years, and the Navy Family Readiness Program has grown with it. The program is committed to remaining relevant to the mission.

Summary and Conclusion:

Given the unbreakable link between family readiness and operational readiness, the Navy Family Readiness Program will continue its commitment to provide effective family programs. The success of the program, in the face of financial challenges to the services, will largely depend on its ability to develop efficient and targeted outreach programs.

In working toward that goal, we are increasing our response capability to reach geographically dispersed family members of our active and reserve components. We will continue our efforts, within our budgetary constraints, to provide resources and services to Individual Augmentee and Global War on Terror Support Assignment families, families of wounded, ill or injured, and our ombudsmen network that supports them. We will continue to explore creative solutions to overcome impediments to full utilization of technology solutions that equip us to maintain unfettered communications with families. Our primary focus remains on delivering the best services at the right time and in the right place.

Five factors contribute to the success of our family support programs: leadership, education, communication, execution and reaction to feedback. I rely heavily on our senior enlisted leaders to ensure every Sailor and every family member knows what support is available to them. But after they have received it we need to hear from them and then we need to improve quickly where necessary.

It is my hope that continued cooperation and support at this level will enhance our family support programs and services. It has long been my opinion that the strength of the Navy lies not strictly with our ships or weapons systems but rather with the men and women who wear the cloth of our Nation and the loved ones who support them from home. .

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